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# The presentation of self in the classical ballet class: dancing with Erving Goffman

Bethany Whiteside<sup>a\*</sup>, John Kelly<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>School of Drama, Dance, Production and Screen, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow, UK; <sup>b</sup>Institute for Sport, Physical Education and Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK*

This article analyses the social interactions and behaviours evident within an adult, amateur ballet class in one of Scotland's cities. Using an ethnographic empirical approach, the study utilises Erving Goffman's (1959) model of dramaturgy to explore the impression management of participants from the ballet class. Evidence (data) was generated through a triangulation of methods enabling the following themes to be explored: vocabulary of ballet; ballet body idiom; teacher-pupil dynamics. The creation of a grounded coding framework saw evidence emerge to suggest that the nature of the dominant 'realities' being presented and maintained are ones that reinforce and authenticate the dancers as embodied ballet students. Much ballet related behavior involves staged presentations of self, felt to be necessary for conveying the 'correct' impression or demeanour expected of a ballet dancer. This article explores the techniques adopted to foster, present and maintain these fronts, seeking to theoretically explain their contextual aspects.

**Keywords:** ballet; Erving Goffman; impression management; vocabulary of ballet; body idiom; teacher-pupil relationship

## Introduction

Although a dearth in sociologically based dance analyses has previously been lamented (Thomas 1995; Turner and Wainwright 2003; Khudaverdian 2006), the last decade has witnessed a number of ballet and contemporary dance studies adopting sociological frameworks, often utilizing the concepts and theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. Studies employing Bourdieusian concepts have centered upon the sociology of the pre-professional and professional ballet body, identity, injury, pain, retirement and training (Turner and Wainwright 2003; Wainwright and Turner 2003; Wainwright 2004; Wainwright et al. 2005; Wainwright et al. 2006; Wainwright et al. 2007; Alexias and Dimitropoulou 2011; Pickard 2012; 2013). Foucault's work has been drawn upon to critique the normalization of the 'ideal' thin body of the female ballet dancer in Anglo-American society (Ritenburg 2010), to investigate the existence of positive and negative surveillance in the professional ballet studio (Dryburgh and Fortin 2010), and to contrast body image and self-esteem of college dance students engaging in both jazz and ballet studies (Heiland et al. 2008).

In particular, Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and Foucault's notion of 'docile bodies' have been drawn upon to contrast the tension between the natural mind and body and the unnatural performance of ballet. One key purpose of the above (largely

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\* Corresponding author. Email : B.Whiteside@rcs.ac.uk

ethnographic) studies was to counteract the dominant postmodern and poststructuralist discourse (e.g. Goellner and Murphy 1995; Adshead-Lansdale 1999; Fraleigh and Hanstein 1999) which reduced dance and the dancer's body primarily to 'texts' (Wainwright et al. 2007). However, this has resulted in limited attention being paid to the significance of local level individual and group actions, which we believe to be central to understanding the sociological factors helping shape dance worlds.

This article seeks to build on this emerging sociology of dance to reveal more explicitly some of the everyday interaction enabling sociological patterns of behavior to be revealed and explained. We focus on the classical ballet doctrine. Within Britain this culture is partly maintained and promoted by The Royal Academy of Dance (RAD). The ballet class explored in this study adopts the RAD syllabus, which teaches the style of ballet internationally recognised as the English style and which is characterized by its own specific vocabulary and set of cultural values, requiring its techniques to be learnt in a certain fashion, maintaining the ballet lexicon (Johnston 2006).

The ballet genre is honed, maintained and protected by pedagogical techniques and traditions that are both rigorous and formal (Juhasz 2003). Pedagogically, the practice is characterised by teacher-led training giving the student minimal opportunity for dialogue, dissension or voluntary, autonomous expression (Morris 2003). Tradition plays an important role in the ballet methodology adopted by the RAD and many ballet teachers in the wider sector feel pressure from other parties to continue practising customary autocratic teaching techniques (Fortin and Siedentop 1995; Löytönen 2004). This has contributed to the teaching of ballet to be described as the 'systematic removal of individuality by teaching conformity to an imposed idea' (Van Dyke 1992, 114). The traditional and authoritative nature of the ballet class, company and studio lends itself to sociological interrogation. In exposing and interrogating these everyday relationships and behaviours, the study utilises Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework to identify a range of social interactions including actions, conversations and dress, existing within one adult amateur ballet class. We seek to explore the mechanisms and functions around which a ballet class takes place, and we critique their impact on constructing and fostering a series of particular 'fronts'<sup>1</sup>. We focus on the subtle socialisation processes of a group of ballet dancers that are marginalised in the literature and we extend the theoretical possibilities beyond Bourdieu and Foucault, to make an innovative and original contribution to the sociology of dance.

### **Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework**

Goffman's dramaturgical framework (1959) utilises the metaphor of theatrical performance to explain the portrayal and management of everyday, face-to-face interaction. The key objective of the individual - the 'performer' - is to perform their specific role according to the expectations and obligations of the social situation, 'to sustain the portrayal of his (sic) particular claim to reality' (Goffman 1959, 90). As Molnar and Kelly (2013) explain, 'these roles enable individuals to maintain high degrees of *impression management* to avoid embarrassment or faux pas and to present themselves in the best possible light' (120, original emphasis). Roles are performed in conjunction with three interconnected elements: the physical environment ('setting'); the appearance and manner of the performer ('personal front'); and the collective, situational expectation

(‘front’). Collective expectations (‘fronts’) become institutionalized to the extent that performers and onlookers (‘audience’) are familiar with patterns and obligations and:

can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him (sic) to mobilise his past experience and stereotypical thinking. Observers then need only be familiar with a small and hence manageable vocabulary of fronts, and know how to respond to them, in order to orient themselves in a wide variety of situations (Goffman 1959, 36).

This is accomplished by presenting a manner and appearance that convinces witnesses (and often oneself) of the performance. For Goffman, these impression management routines underscore all day-to-day social intercourse. They occur in different locations labelled by Goffman (1959) as ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’. Front stage is where the performance is presented to the audience (usually any situation where there are others present) and back stage is a place inhabited by performers only (for example, a dressing or changing room). Goffman argued ‘the very structure of the self can be seen in terms of how we arrange for such performances in our Anglo-American society’ (Goffman 1959, 244). People are ‘part of the cultural apparatus of society; [and] act in specific ways because of some hidden social constraint to do so’ (Williams 2001, ~~353~~ 352). We expose some of these hidden social constraints in ballet and we explain their reasons.

Goffman’s concepts and theoretical frameworks have been widely utilised. His dramaturgical model has been adopted in corporate management (Gardner and Martinko 1988; Grove and Fisk 1992; White and Hanson 2002), the hotel industry (Dillard et al. 2000), the operating theatre (Tanner and Timmons 2000; Riley and Manias 2005), public relations (Johanssen 2007), and social movements (Benford and Hunt 1992). Moving closer to the discipline of dance, dramaturgy has been utilised for analysing erotic performance (Enck and Preston 1988; Wosick-Correa and Joseph 2008) and has been adopted in the overlapping worlds of sport, leisure and outdoor education (e.g. Ingham 1975; Birrell and Turowetz 1979; Carroll 1980; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Schmitt 1993; Birrell and Donnelly 2004; Kelly 2007a, 2007b, 2013a, 2013b; Beames and Pike 2008).

We utilize Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to explore the workings of an adult amateur ballet class for a number of reasons. Ballet training has been described as hidden ‘systemic programs of instruction’ (Foster 1997, 238) and the studio is a space designed and reserved for the activity of dance. Goffman’s dramaturgical framework defines a performance as ‘a pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance’ (1959, 27). This definition of a performance is particularly relevant to the ballet class as performance of exercises take place in the universal format of barre, centre practice, adage and allegro. ‘A macro choreographed performance (the dancing) merges with micro individual performances’ (Whiteside, 2013). This article analyses the small unit of a ballet class setting to reveal and explain the behaviours and motivations of its participants, demonstrating the institutional and universal elements to what appears on the surface to be personally formed behaviours, but what are actually rooted in pre-existing and well-established definitions of situations. As Smith (2006) concisely summarises:

Goffman showed how many of our seemingly insignificant and idiosyncratic concerns (our expletives when we drop a glass, our discomfort when a stranger holds a glance at us too long) are consequences of the normative ordering of interactional conduct. Goffman ... is never more clearly present than when he is drawing our attention to the social sources of a feeling or item of conduct we had thought uniquely ours (32).

Goffman (1959) explains that individuals may be taken in by their own act. We suggest that the ballet class participants in our study aim to be taken in by their own performance to convince themselves and others they are embodied, authentic ballet dancers. However, the 'impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing' (Goffman 1959, 63) and the dance participants' ability to maintain their individual 'personal front' and enjoy the class, may be impacted upon by 'team' discrepancies in social status, ballet ability, etiquette, and physical appearance. Goffman (1959) defines a team as 'a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained' (108). The study of a ballet class, of 'a routine which requires a team of several performers' (Goffman 1959, 105) allows two key 'teams' to be identified; the participants of the class who portray themselves as authentic ballet dancers to the teacher, each other and those outside of this world, and participants and teacher combined who unite to portray the same front (of a ballet class). The impression management of the situations, then, provides insights into the workings and motivations of the ballet dancers (and teacher) and ultimately into the individual and institutional obligations and expectations surrounding the adult amateur ballet class.

### **Research approach**

The research focused on one well-established ballet class in Scotland that has been operational for a number of years. Participants range in age from 20 to 50, with 21 female and four male participants possessing a variety of experiences and skills. At the time of data collection, the lead author was a participant in the class<sup>2</sup>. Semi-structured interviews and participant observations were employed to discover the definitions of the situations being played out in the dance class, specifically focusing on actions, atmosphere, behaviours, conversation, dress, opinions and views relating to the 'performance(s)' of ballet teacher and dancers. Throughout the research period the researcher adopted the role of Participant as Observer (Gold 1958) and continued to attend and perform as an active member of the class.

In true Goffman style, observant participation<sup>3</sup> occurred throughout the two years of class participation. However, a more focused participant observation occurred in the periods leading up to, during, and after, the semi-structured interviews took place. Fieldnotes were taken throughout one term which comprised of 11 weekly ballet classes over three months, each lasting 90 minutes. The approach adopted allowed the data collection process and focus to be constantly modified and improved, with the aim of devising a more complete picture of social interaction within the class. By 'playing an established participant role' (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998, 111), the lead author was able to kinesthetically experience movement being taught, and to have greater interaction with the other dancers, which in turn may have facilitated an atmosphere of comfort and trust for participants (Green and Stinson 1999).

A selection of participants ~~were~~ was interviewed based on their professional status, age, ethnicity, ballet experience and technical prowess in an aim to be broadly representative of the class. The interviewees were identified as ‘situationally positioned individuals with unique identities’ (Brett Davies 2007, 148). Four female dancers and one male dancer were interviewed in depth, along with the class teacher.

~~(Table 1. Summary of sample (teacher and dancers))~~

Semi-structured interviews were adopted to gain rich detail relating to the actions and opinions as relayed by the class teacher and dancers. Each interviewee was interviewed once, with interviews being audio-recorded and ranging from fifty minutes to two hours. Interview questions focused on thematic prompts that emerged from the participant observations conducted over the two years. These centered on: motivation to attend/teach the class; studio resources and space; health and well-being; ballet pedagogy. Dance pedagogy has been described as ‘a dichotomy between reproduction and production’ (Gibbons 2007, 14) and a second dichotomy particularly inherent to the field of ballet is the extreme between emotion in movement and superior physicality (Fortin and Siedentop, 1995). These concepts were central to seeking understanding of the teacher-student relationship and dance content of the class.

Fieldwork undertaken and the subsequent field notes written up were based on ‘a complex combination of sensation and perception’ (Gray 2004, 238). Mental capture was the primary exercise undertaken, with copious notes being taken immediately after class, before a detailed write up and analysis occurred.

Guidelines provided by The University of Edinburgh Ethical Guidelines Committee were followed and approval was given by this committee for the study to take place. Informed consent was given by interviewees to take part in this study and permission was also granted by the organisation hosting the ballet class. Anonymity has been assured through the use of pseudonyms in this article.

## **Discussion**

Goffman (1963) distinguished between various everyday interactions, noting that some more than others are bound in time and place, constituting ‘social occasions’ (18). These social occasions ‘provide(s) the structuring social context’ (18) in which bounded rules and expectations occur and exist and which help shape, influence and control behaviour.

A social occasion provides the structuring social context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely to form, dissolve, and re-form, while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognised as the appropriate and (often) official or intended one (18).

Viewed in such a way, we can begin to view the ballet class as a social occasion and to understand what motivates the individual participants to attend the class, providing a strong basis for interrogating the collective actions, attitudes and behaviours (conduct) that are suggestive of the dominant definitions of the situation for embodied ballet dancers and their teacher. The discussion begins by looking at the vocabulary of ballet, specifically noting the centrality that familiarity of ballet and elitism have for portraying

an authentic ballet experience. Then, ballet body idiom and surveillance are shown to influence and shape dancers' costume, presentational behavior in the front stage and back stage settings, and attitudes towards pain and injury. The final section discusses the central relationship dynamic between teacher and adult pupil dancer, showing how important the traditional model of authoritarian teacher is to sustaining the desired social distance between them. For coherency and ease in reading the discussion, dancers are referenced as (d) and the teacher as (t).

### ***The vocabulary of ballet***

One obvious way for the dancers and teacher to discover instantly if an individual is part of the class 'team', or ballet community is their levels of familiarity with the unique vocabulary employed by the genre and its significance in what is largely a non-verbal art form. As Goffman (1959) states, within a team setting 'accomplices are forced to define one another as in the know' (88) and this is bound by familiarity, a key medium in this case being the vocabulary of ballet. Ballet 'has an established movement vocabulary, embodying balletic ideals subject to stylistic interpretation' (Fraleigh 1987, xxxiv).

Richard (t) describes ballet vocabulary as 'a kind of notation... and the verbal notation of ballet is one of the ways that we know what went on'. Timothy (d), Janet (d) and Annabel (d) each emphasised the pleasure that they get from a ballet vocabulary which has evolved over a period of several centuries and with which the corps, soloists, ballerinas, prima ballerinas and danseurs of the great companies have all engaged. Janet (d) emphasises that although the vocabulary 'has a French base, it is a language of its own, it does make it different. So a French person who doesn't know ballet wouldn't necessarily know what was meant'. Both Katie (d) and Catherine (d) emphasised the stability and constancy of the ballet vocabulary in the various countries in which they have taken classes as playing a key role in their continued enjoyment of learning ballet and as comforting when new to a geographical area. The vocabulary of ballet can be viewed in dramaturgical terms as an 'inside secret'; it has limited strategic importance but an individual's intellectual understanding of the genre's language 'marks an individual as being a member of a group and helps the group feel separate and different from those individuals who are not "in the know"' (Goffman 1959, 142).

It also offers the desired familiarity expected by the established team members, enabling them to feel an immediate sense of ease and authenticity. The importance of understanding ballet vocabulary was evident in class when participants who did not have extensive knowledge of the vocabulary waited to see what their fellow students would do when an exercise was called, and a sense of embarrassment could be discerned for fear of being outed as an interloper, outsider or inauthentic participant (observation fieldnotes).

Motivation for participating in the class is linked to a wish to foster both a personal and situational front - a ballet self within a ballet environment - each reinforcing and authenticating the other, to project this combined front outside of class while ephemerally escaping professional and domestic identities. Just as spoken vocabulary may enjoy higher status than less pure forms of speech, the vocabulary of dance possesses higher and lower status value according to the type of dance being 'spoken'. A

significant feature of the vocabulary of dance in this ballet class involves projecting a definition of the situation as being elite and highly specialized. As Annabel suggests, participants engage in this ballet class because they like to be associated with an elite art form. Annabel (d) talks about the emphasis on elitism given in class: 'As he [Richard] says to us, ok we are The Paris Opera [Ballet], we are The Bolshoi, and for a split second, you could almost believe it'.

Richard (t) notes:

When you are doing classical ballet, you are amongst the elite of the elite, so I have no problem with the elitism of ballet. You, as a dancer... non-professional, adult, amateur status are amongst the elite of the elite.

The notion that ballet is viewed as elitist and is superior to other dance forms is further explained by Annabel (d):

I think it encourages discipline in learning... It seems to be on that upper level. Whereas tap and jazz are a bit more relaxed, but ballet... the vocabulary definitely fits in with the whole notion that it is something... elite.

This elitism is reinforced by dancers who feel they have earned the special qualifications (classical training, disciplined devotion, etc.) required for their role and seek to maintain distance – be distinct - from non-specialists lacking such qualification. Goffman (1959) suggests such desires:

require(s) practitioners to absorb a mystical range and period of training, in part to maintain a monopoly, but in part to foster the impression that the licensed practitioner is someone who has been reconstituted by his (sic) learning experience and is now set apart from other men (sic) (55).

However, the belief that one is worthy of association with the elitism of ballet is constantly challenged by the technical performances given, even when understanding of the vocabulary is enjoyed. Within the ballet class 'the standards for perfection are so clearly defined' (Foster 1997, 243) and as Annabel (s) states: 'If you're being honest you know where you rank'. Juhasz (2003) describes ballet as 'the most rigorous, the most beautiful both to see and to feel, and the most formal. Every movement made by every part of the body has the correct procedure and shape. You cannot cheat in ballet...' (335).

### ***Ballet body idiom***

#### *Costume*

The need to foster the impression that ballet is something special or elite and necessitates a 'setting apart' from others is illustrated by Katie (d) who expresses a desire to be distinct from unqualified non-specialists, when explaining her dance clothing. She admits 'I don't want to look like I'm going to the gym'. Wearing traditional ballet clothing also helps the participant to present an idealized image of the embodied ballet dancer. ['Embodied' within this context, is a wished-for consequence of both internally enjoying](#)



and externally performing, kinaesthetic sensation of the ballet dancing, and habitually knowing and portraying ballet specific beliefs and behaviours. In every society, groups adopt non-verbal communication techniques and these become common, regular and understood (institutionalized). Just like verbal communication, this 'idiom of individual appearances and gestures' (Goffman 1963, 33) tends to be modified with its public audience (and their interpretation) in mind. A key part of expressing the ballet body idiom involves using a 'costume' or physical attire as an expression of the role an individual wishes to convey (Goffman 1959). In Richard's (t) opinion, the class attendees 'should be in leotards and tights, hair in a bun and looking absolutely naked'. The participants believed the wearing of traditional ballet clothing reaffirms their desired status of authentic ballet dancer. Katie (d) says: 'I try to wear (sic) properly for a dancing class... The clothes sometimes help you feeling into the moment, the dancing class'. For Catherine (d), attending class in the traditional leotard and tights is an important means for presenting herself as a serious ballet student, for giving due respect to the role: 'I won't get better if I show up looking like a student'.

Whilst there is a degree of affirming the role and its elitist status by wearing the 'right' clothing, some participants do not always feel comfortable dancing in this attire. Timothy (d) dislikes dancing in tights: 'I am quite a big guy, obviously by British standards I don't look too big but in a ballet class where the girls are looking like fairies, I am going to stand out'. Janet (d) likes to wear a skirt over her leotard and tights: 'I know you can see through it but I just need something there. I just wanted that little frill there to feel a little bit less exposed'. Oliver (2005) argues that both the classical ballet community and wider society share the same criteria – ground in feminist ideals – of both males and females for ideal beauty in ballet. As Richard (t) explains:

You are always going to have the idea that the ballet body girl is supposed to be very svelte and the ballet body boy should also be svelte but kind of chunky and you can't get away from that one.

In spite of some concerns about wearing traditional ballet wear, the class all adhere to the tradition because they are part of the wider ballet community and therefore the appropriate attire is to some degree fostered upon them. Additionally, they want to wear the correct 'costume' to maintain the 'reality' that they are a legitimate and worthy part of this (elite) community. This is unsurprising, given that 'the understanding of a common body idiom is one reason for calling an aggregate of individuals a society' (Goffman 1963, 35). Likewise, the ballet class retains its collectively agreed status partly due to this commonly understood body idiom, of which costume is a major part.

### *Body surveillance*

The ballet studio may be seen as a place of safety, a sacred place that adopts a particular etiquette in determining what is acceptable to those inhabiting it. The studio can be described as the 'shell which conceals the spirited life of a performer' (Goffman 1959, 52). The changing room can be viewed as the significant 'back stage' fulfilling various functions and, with having a 'fixed back region identity' (Goffman 1959, 126), is associated with being a hide-out. This is where items from another 'personal front' are stored; the props and costumes necessary for the participant to carry out their expected

ballet role and an area where the audience (in this case, teacher) seldom, if ever, enters. The back region is where performers can drop their guard, suspend their public face and be their natural self. Certain tensions can be displayed more openly and bonds can be reaffirmed as the participants take a break from maintaining the shared expectations their public performance demands (Goffman 1959). Goffman (1959) observed that as the participants move from back stage to front stage, ‘one can detect a wonderful putting on and taking off of character’ (123). Thus it was common to witness a transformation in behaviour whereby the class participants prepared their public face during the walk along the corridor from changing rooms to the studio, ready to present themselves as authentic and enthusiastic dancers (‘dramatically realizing’ the expected role to the audience) by stretching and preparing for the serious business of ballet. Goffman (1959) alludes to this type of action as a scheduling exercise, to assist the movement from one ‘personal front’ to another ‘in a continuous performance’ (138). The studio with its barre and mirrors (‘fixed-sign equipment’) provides the necessary setting for the participants to begin their ‘performance’. One of the first actions of participants upon entering the studio is to adopt an appropriate body idiom by stretching their legs up on the barre and preening themselves in the mirror. As the exercise in pliés is called and participants adopt a personal front of the ballet dancer/teacher, they settle into the exercise and kinaesthetic empathy completes the feeling of safety and security, confirming the legitimacy of the situation and their roles within it.

However, dance studios have been compared to Panopticon prisons due to the incarceration and negative surveillance perpetrated by the institution into the mind-set of their inhabitants (Green 1999; Benn and Walters 2001; Hamera 2005; Dryburgh and Fortin 2010). In particular, the ballet studio has been viewed as a site of power, as a key instigator and medium for promoting and normalising the dominant discourse concerning what body shape is considered ideal or acceptable (Ritenburg 2010). Hamera (2005) argues that the barre is a key place of surveillance and self-surveillance by teachers and dancers, due in part to its close proximity to the mirrors which are used extensively in class. However, centre can be a far more exposing place to dance than at the barre. As Juhasz (2003) states, you lose ‘the relative anonymity of being in a line along the wall with all the other students’ (341). Richard (t) understands the fear associated with being seen and judged:

Ballet is the most difficult, because it is the most exposing of all the dance forms. We’re trying to get you to take your kit off and look at yourselves and make beautiful shapes and sculpt the air. We’re not just sculpting the body, we’re sculpting the air.

Mirrors are employed in an attempt to achieve this and they contribute to the existence of negative surveillance in the ballet studio, with regards to body image and the technical performance given. In conversing with professional ballet dancers, Dryburgh and Fortin (2010) noted that the majority of persons involved in their study used the mirror as a tool to improve through self-judgement and criticism, leading to body surveillance and the desire to conform to what is commonly perceived to be the ideal female ballet body type (slim and petite). Annabel (d) states that one ‘could feel totally naked because of the mirrors and the lights and the bright space’. Janet (d) remarked: ‘In your head you’re being beautiful but when you look in the mirror and you see this elephant gallumping

across, it does detract a little bit'. The negative effects of using the mirrors on participants' self esteem is also reiterated by Richard (t): 'Sometimes I try to get everyone, the adults in the *croisé devant* position, to turn to look and it is really hard because everyone must go, "oh god, that's what I look like"'.

However, Dryburgh and Fortin (2010) conversely found that this reciprocal surveillance of the body could elicit healthy self-surveillance and motivation to continually improve. This was evidenced in our study. Annabel (d) states: 'I can't always see myself so I wonder if I try as hard because I'm not able to see what I'm doing wrong... I sometimes feel like I don't get as much from it'. Katie (d) uses them: 'For learning and copying, to feel more confident'. Catherine (d) notes that:

Even if there isn't a mirror, everyone else can still see me and what I'm doing so I may as well know what I'm looking like too. A lack of mirrors is not going to hide me from everyone else. I feel much more insecure without one.

Wainwright (2005) argues 'the dancer's biggest critic will always be himself or herself' (53). Therefore this may contribute to a fascination with looking at one's self rather than at the other dancers present (Juhasz 2003).

### *Pain and injury*

Alongside costume and body surveillance, a key feature of the ballet body idiom is witnessed in discourse around pain and injury. Goffman (1959) states 'A body is a piece of consequential equipment, and its owner is always putting it on the line' (127). The professional ballet career is one characterised by pain and injury (Brinson and Dick 1996; Aalten 1997). In this adult amateur class all of the participants interviewed have experienced some form of performance related injury. Turner and Wainwright (2003) argue that to some extent 'ballet injury is socially constructed, because a ballet dancer may be expected to dance with a certain level of strain or injury' (284–285). This action leads to injury being sustained due to the dancer's 'sense of professional discipline and attachment to the ballet company' (275). However, experience of pain and injury in the class contributes to dancers' authenticity. Whilst injury may not be actively sought or welcomed, its existence is potentially viewed as a significant feature of the pre-professional and professional worlds (observation fieldnotes). By experiencing pain and exhaustion the class participants are, in some small way, sharing the same authentic 'reality' as their pre-professional and professional peers which fosters the dramaturgical front being desired in presenting the preferred definition of the situation. This was evidenced when observing dancers discuss (or not) pain and injury.

Significantly, the extent to which participants complained or spoke about their pain and/or injuries in class can be directly equated to their previous experience and status in the ballet world. It was observed that in contrast to the more experienced dancers, the less experienced dancers were more expressive about their aches and pains, both in class and in the changing room. The more experienced dancers rarely complained of pain or tiredness. Both experienced and less experienced dancers recognize that pain is an inevitable part of performing the role of dancer. Tellingly, however, in performing the role (of authentic dancer), the less experienced dancers publicly demonstrate their role by doing what Goffman (1959) termed 'dramatic realization' (40). They draw attention to their pain and injury, believing this to dramatically realize their dancer identity to

themselves and others. In doing so, however, they are unwittingly committing a faux pas in the process. Dramatic realization of pain and injury then occurs in inverse proportion to higher levels of authenticity of performer. In other words, when a performer is highly experienced, the need (desire or pressure) to publicly demonstrate their commitment (by showing or discussing injury) is negated. The less experienced performer shows her naivety by publicly displaying her injuries in a way that ironically she feels is reinforcing her desired authenticity.

### **Teacher–pupil dynamic**

The traditional model of ballet pedagogy is dominated by technique training of an obedient, authoritarian style (Warburton 2002; Morris 2003; Jackson 2005; Johnston 2006), and within a ‘team performance’ one person often takes the role of directing and controlling that ‘performance’ (Goffman 1959). In this context, that person is the ballet teacher. We contend that in ballet the traditional autocratic teacher is necessary for the desired personal front (and its accompanying definition of the situation) to be maintained. Autocratic teaching appears to be enjoyed in part, at least, because this scenario adheres to the traditional institutionalized practice of ballet pedagogy. This requires a front of autocratic, demanding teachers who deserve subservient obedience and acquiescent adherence to instructions. Such a front confirms for participants that they are enacting an authentic version of ballet training. Consequently, teacher and dancer seek to maintain it. Gibbons (2007) describes the dance teacher as ‘an oracle’ (14) and Janet (d) agrees:

They are the ones that know what they’re talking about. You are the ones who are there to worship at the feet of the master and learn. If you want to know what they know, you have to listen to them.

Catherine (d) reiterates this opinion stating: ‘The teacher is the one who is the best in the class. The teacher to me is always the one at the top’. Both parties (teacher and dancer) then cooperate to achieve the desired definition of the situation, enjoying a ‘working consensus’ (Goffman 1959, 21) involving honouring their own and the other’s position and the overall social front. ‘There is then, perforce, a bond of reciprocal dependence linking team–mates to one another’ (Goffman 1959, 88).

An overriding wish to ‘worship at the feet of the master’ may explain the following scenario witnessed on one occasion: In the centre, Richard (t) told the participants that he understood how hard it was to learn because he was learning a musical instrument and found it very difficult. He confessed that he knew what everyone was going through. Silence met this announcement and the participants looked uncomfortable (observation fieldnotes). Such unease among the dancers illustrates Goffman’s ‘discrepant role’ point: that when faced with a performer (in this case, teacher) acting out of character (as the novice learner) in an unfamiliar context, the others (dancers) often feel uneasy. The established front (of masterful, wise, aloof and detached teacher) seems, momentarily at least, to be discredited by a teacher who is a mortal, surrendering his deficiencies to his class. That this ‘destructive information’ relates to learning a musical instrument is inconsequential. There exist those persons who become so inextricably linked to a role and space that it would be improper to view them in another context (Goffman 1959)<sup>4</sup>.

Yet, vulnerability (of teacher) is only part of this situation. Social distance is also an important device for maintaining the desired front. As Annabel (d) states:

He [Richard] is very much a teacher so there is a degree of distance ... there is a barrier but with ballet in particular, this barrier is important, because it (the genre) has to be so disciplined.

This 'barrier' is necessary for the distinction of roles to be maintained and, in relation to the above observation, dancers did not wish to view the teacher in an unfamiliar scenario or in overly familiar terms and certainly not as somebody not in full control. This is not coincidental. Goffman (1959) reminds us 'the maintenance of social distance provide(s) a way in which awe can be generated and sustained in the audience' (74). Restricted familiarity allows the imagination of dancers to idealize the teacher.

### **Conclusion**

We have interrogated a number of face-to-face behaviours present in an adult amateur ballet class, to reveal these localized acts to be ground in obligations expected in particular environments during social occasions. Such 'occasioned activity' has been shown to belong less to the individual and more to the occasions and roles being performed. The ballet class has been shown to have a common structure with properties, regulations and behaviours guiding individuals towards performing their ballet roles accurately. What appears on the surface to be that of the conscious individual is actually socially structured consisting of institutionalized expectations and obligations. Goffman (1959) argues that when a 'performer' adopts a certain social role, they will find that 'a particular front has already been established for it' (37). Thus:

a given social front tends to become institutionalised in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name. The front becomes a 'collective representation' and a fact in its own right (Goffman 1959, 37).

Understanding of the vocabulary of ballet, ballet body idiom and teacher-pupil dynamics have been shown to be part of the ideal representation of participant behaviour (teacher and dancers) in the ballet class studied, representing key elements of impression management. What are often thought to be unique, spontaneous and individual are often expected, obligatory and staged; adherence to and emulation of these social ideals and behaviours allows the adult amateur dancer with limited ballet technique, to be part of a world idealized for its technical elegance, elitism and beauty.

### **Notes**

This paper is based on research undertaken and presented as part of a postgraduate dance dissertation previously produced by the first author.

1. Goffman stressed that front consisted of both the personal and situational. Personal front contributes to maintaining the situational front (witnessed, for example, when a doctor wears a white coat and is sympathetic and caring while in the hospital ward).

2. The corresponding author participated as a class member for two years in total, prior to research being conducted.
3. Goffman (1959) preferred the term observant participant to participant observer and participant as observer, implying that, irrespective of levels of personal participation, all social interaction could be observed.
4. Perhaps the clearest example is found in the young school child who bumps into her teacher in the supermarket. This 'out of role' meeting is often accompanied by an immediate curiosity expressed in thoughts like 'what is *she* doing *here*? (as though teachers are only ever legitimate performers in the classroom setting).

### Notes on contributors

Bethany Whiteside is undertaking an ESRC CASE Studentship, supported by Capacity Building Cluster 'Capitalising on Creativity' grant #RES 187-24-001 in the sociology of participatory dance. In 2014, she was appointed Visiting Research Scholar at Temple University Dance Department, funded by the ESRC as an Overseas Institutional Visit and was a founding Co-Editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance*.

John Kelly is a sociologist who lectures in socio-cultural issues and sport at Edinburgh University. He is a member of the Edinburgh Sport Research Group within the university's Institute for Sport, Physical Education and Health Sciences.

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